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The Challenges of International Education: Developing a Public Relations Unit for the Asian Region

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The Challenges of International Education: Developing a Public Relations Unit for the Asian Region

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Abstract

Murdoch University's public relations program attracts a significant number of international students. Up to 60% of students in some units come from Singapore and Malaysia. While many spend at least one year in Australia as part of the three year degree, students in both countries may complete the entire degree offshore from 2007.

The authors rewrote a second year public relations unit with the aim of making it more relevant for local and international students. This posed particular challenges in terms of pedagogical and conceptual approaches. For instance, there are cultural and linguistic issues which influence the ways students learn, and which have particular implications for a unit which expressly aims to consolidate students' professional writing skills. There are also implications for public relations theory, which tends to be dominated by Western concepts and models, and public relations practice, which varies in different countries.

This paper offers a reflection on the issues we addressed in the redevelopment of the unit, as well as some suggestions for future teaching and learning practices.

Introduction

Murdoch University is by no means unique in the drive to attract full fee-paying international students. With over 300,000 international students and a growth rate of approximately 11% a year (IDP 2005), Australian universities have the largest proportion of international students enrolled in their courses (Harman 2004). The reason for marketing Australian degrees overseas is primarily economic; in an era of decreasing public funding and increasing instability for the tertiary sector, full-fee paying students are seen as a viable solution to maintaining and developing Australian tertiary institutions. International students generated an estimated \$5.03 billion dollars in 2003 for Australian universities (IDP 2006).

However, this poses a challenge for educators. How do we ensure that the degree is relevant for a diverse student cohort (some of whom may remain in their own countries to study, yet gain an Australian degree, which may or may not prepare them for careers in that country)? Furthermore, how, as educators, do we engage students from countries we know little about? Additionally, what are the implications for Australian students? These questions also raise interesting issues for a discipline such as public relations, which is concerned primarily with professional—and ethical—communication with a range of diverse publics.

Most writers on public relations education agree that it should foster a 'global and multicultural' outlook (Walker 2000:39). For instance, public relations graduates should appreciate 'global cultures' and 'cultural and gender diversity' (Commission on Public Relations Education 1999) and understand 'the societal context in which public relations operates' (Turner 2003:6) or the political and cultural variables which influence its practice (Sriramesh 2004). Although there is plenty of research on the impact of internationalisation of higher education, little research has been done on the impact on teaching public relations in Australia, or how Australian public relations curricula should meet the growing demand from international students.

In 2005, a second year unit such as MSC235 Public Relations: Principles and Writing Practice had a total of 134 students enrolled with the following breakdown. One hundred and two were enrolled onshore, of which 47 (= 46%, or almost half) were international students. In addition, 32 students completed the same unit offshore at a partner institution in Kuala Lumpur. In 2005, students completed two years of the degree in Malaysia and the third year in Australia (from 2006, students are able to complete the entire degree offshore). If we include all students enrolled in this second year unit in 2005, of the 134 students, 59% are international (24% offshore, 35% onshore). Most of the international students come from Singapore and Malaysia.

The unit is ambitious; it was the first public relations-specific unit Murdoch introduced six years ago, so the opportunity to review its objectives is important. At present, the unit aims to offer both an introduction to the study of public relations, to critically challenge both normative and professional approaches, and to consolidate writing skills, which students have been introduced to in a general first-year writing unit (albeit with a specific public relations focus).

Only a few Australian tertiary institutions (for example, James Cook and RMIT University) have a specific policy regarding the internationalism of curricula. The problem is that if the university simply markets its existing degrees to international students, it fails to consider the social, cultural and educational implications this might entail (Leask 2003; Das 2004). Is it enough—as was suggested to one of the authors—simply to include Asian case studies in some units, and to provide additional English language support? It could be argued that such an approach offers only a superficial, 'technical' solution to internationalising curricula (McTaggart 2003:7–8).

Others would argue that this approach employs a 'deficit' model, where international students are deemed to 'lack' certain skills, or are considered in need of remedial assistance (Das 2004; Biggs 1999). The problem with such an approach is that it really advocates a kind of Western or intellectual imperialism (Dunn and Wallace 2004; Pincas 2001; Rothwell 2005; Badley 2000). This has implications for the students themselves (in terms of how they might develop into confident and questioning learners) and for how we understand public relations (as fundamentally about an ethical commitment to one's stakeholders) in terms of adopting normative approaches from Western cultures as universal models and theories. If we fail to review the programs we offer to international students, we are arguably guilty of assuming that Western education and Western public relations values are superior. This reveals a lack of mutual respect for the diversity of our students (Warner, cited in Beasley 2002:62), and risks labelling international students as deviant and/or subordinate (Dawson and Conti-Bekkers 2002:1; Pincas 2001:5).

This resonates with recent postmodern theories of public relations. For instance, critical scholars such as Holtzhausen argue that practitioners should respect—and address in positive ways—such diversity (2000:108). Others, such as Sriramesh (2004), call for greater diversity in public relations research, and, in particular, identify the need for case studies and material from non-Anglo-American (and, we add, from Australian-New Zealand) countries. Holtzhausen argues that there is a real danger of the public relations body of knowledge (in particular a reliance on Grunig and Hunt's four models) developing into a metanarrative (Holtzhausen 2000: 109).

There are two broad themes which we consider important when discussing the internationalisation of a public relations unit: first, the role of culture and, second, the role of language issues in the education of international students. We have chosen these as our themes because we believe language and culture have implications not only for how we teach public relations as an academic discipline, but also for how we understand public relations as a profession in which our graduates aim to make their careers.

The Impact of Culture

Much has been written about Asian students (the term itself has the effect of homogenising 'Asian' culture) as 'passive' or 'reproductive' learners (Badke 2002; Ballard and Clanchy 1997; Beattie 1994). While there is no doubt that cultural issues do impact on learning styles, we find that all (i.e. domestic and international) students struggle initially with academic learning and writing, particularly with concepts such as 'criticality' which come out of a Western academic tradition. The importance for public relations is that the qualities fostered and encouraged by 'deep' approaches to learning are precisely those qualities sought by employers of new graduates. These are the ability to question; develop a clear position; use information to solve problems; be creative; consider all points of view; communicate effectively; encourage independent thought, and so on.

The challenge for public relations educators is therefore to engage a diverse, multicultural, transnational student cohort and to foster critical inquiry and evaluative skills, rather than focus on a more superficial understanding of information as knowledge. While we agree it is wrong to characterise Asian learners as shallow or rote learners (Biggs 1999; Melles 2004), we may need to accept that education—like public relations—is culturally constructed or culturally specific. Typically, Western education places a high value on questioning, evaluating and critiquing knowledge (Pincas 2001; Badke 2002). These are precisely the skills that will serve the public relations practitioner if we want to develop public relations as a strategic management profession, a profession which is concerned explicitly with problem-solving and critical thinking (see Badke 2002:3).

One way of fostering a 'deeper' learning style in students is to make our expectations—in terms of learning through classroom practices and assessment—explicit. Being explicit as to the unit objectives, and in the assessment we devise (as for students, the assessment defines the curriculum (Ramsden, cited in Biggs 1991:161)), exposes the 'hidden values' in Western academic traditions with which international – and indeed domestic—students often struggle (Pincas 2001:36). One strategy is to 'model' different approaches to an essay topic, by showing examples from students' essays in previous years.

The other challenge for transnational educators is how best to contextualise theory in an unknown culture (Rothwell 2005: 318). This has important implications both for unit content and in teaching practices (see Ramsden 1992:66). Obviously, we try to stay abreast of current affairs and issues in Malaysia and Singapore where the bulk of our international students come from. However, we probably do not do this as well as we should or could. Biggs (1999) stresses the importance of considering students' prior learning in curricular development and teaching practices; Pincas (2001) argues that by engaging students—precisely by encouraging them to draw and reflect on their own experiences and culture—can be an important way of fostering problem-solving skills.

Consequently, it is important to make such cultural comparisons an explicit component of the unit. This allows all students to develop an awareness of different understandings and forms of public relations in different cultures, and allows international students to value their prior learning and culture. While a 'deficit model' of international teaching would hardly foster the cultural sensitivity and global awareness called for in public relations education or demonstrate a respect for local diversity and identity, making this part of the course content and a course objective is one way of avoiding a form of Western educational imperialism.

Another way of avoiding intellectual imperialism—or the insensitive communication of Western values—is by using the students as a source of information to provide local contextualisation (Badley 2000). We ask students to compare public relations practices across different cultures in tutorial presentations, essays and class discussions, drawing on their own knowledge and experiences to do so. In addition, through case studies and tutorial discussions, students are encouraged to draw on local (i.e. their home country) examples and compare them with Western ones. As teachers, we have learnt a lot from the public relations campaigns and case studies students introduce, based on an analysis of the communication materials generated in relation to the following topics:

- Power blackouts in Malaysia and Western Australia
- Singapore–Malaysia water issue
- Singapore Airlines crash
- Taiwanese government elections
- Malaysian government elections
- Integrated Resorts casino development in Singapore.

Rather than imposing an Australian/Western perspective on public relations, students are invited to consider the differences in conceptual and professional approaches, and to relate these to particular social and political contexts. The main unit objective is that students should grasp the meaning and scope of public relations as ethical and responsible professional practice, and its place in contemporary Australian and Asian cultures. In addition, students should develop an understanding of the theories that can usefully inform the international field of public relations. This allows students to develop a critical understanding of public relations and its complex relationships with cultural and environmental variables (and see Rizvi in McTaggart 2003:6).

In the same way that we argue the 'hidden' values of Western education need to be made explicit for students, an international student cohort provides the opportunity to explore the Western assumptions in normative approaches to public relations.

Language issues: academic writing and professional communication

The language competence, and particularly the writing skills, of Australian undergraduates and graduates has, for a number of years, been frequently reported on. This issue continues to be hotly debated, by disgruntled employers as well as by frustrated tertiary educators (see AC Nielsen 2000). As well, language is often cited as one of the biggest challenges for teachers of international students, both onshore and offshore. International students enrolling in a Murdoch undergraduate degree are required to achieve an IELTS score of six (with no score lower than six across all bands), or to demonstrate comparable levels of competence. However, this standard tests reading, writing, listening and reading as formal and separable skills rather than as components of the complex dynamic of the process of communicating. Therefore the standard often proves to be an inadequate reflection of a student's capacity to engage in and successfully complete the writing tasks set as forms of assessment during the course of their degree—whether these are formal essays or public relations-specific materials, such as media releases, communication plans, or feature articles, for example.

While the focus of most complaints about home and (onshore and offshore) international students' inability to write well concerns their poor command of grammar, syntax, punctuation, and spelling, what is rarely commented on is the way in which such formal skills are crucial precisely, and perhaps only, because they are *inextricably* interwoven with the capacity *to relate to others meaningfully*—in ways that acknowledge shared or diverse understandings of culture, identity and value. In the discipline and practice of public relations the central importance of this capacity to relate should go without saying.

This leads us to consider the associated point of how, within an internationalised framework for public relations education, we might reconcile diverse cultural communication norms (Taylor 2001) with the standardised requirements of (particularly) written English. For example, do Singlish or Chinglish, as the Singaporean or Chinese English variants are respectively known, qualify as appropriate modes of language use by those students writing public relations materials aimed at local publics? Scholars such as Valerie Goby (1999), who teaches English business communication to Singaporean students, suggest that there are occasions when local forms of English are indeed appropriate. Conversely, the linguist David Crystal has pointed out that internationalism has given rise to a demand for so-called 'standard English' (Crystal 1997, pp.110–11), that is, for grammatical, lexical and orthographical consistency. Given public relations education's emphasis on the dynamic association between communicative competence and professionalism, should we, as educators, be demanding conformity to the benchmarks of standard English?

Communicating effectively and ethically with others intra- and inter-culturally requires sensitivity to *culture- and context-specific* rhetorical conventions and patterns of logic and coherence in oral and written expression (see Liddicoat 1997), all of which are beyond the brief of the formal measures of standard English. It is such sensitivity that is at the very core of public relations practice. Indeed, much public relations theory is concerned with exploring a range of approaches that might enhance mutual exchange and understanding between a diversity of publics. Yet it appears that as public relations educators we have yet to address the very real tension between standardisation and diversification noted by Crystal (1997).

A brief overview of our approach to the assessment tasks in the unit might suggest how we are currently addressing some of the language-related challenges we face, as well as our recognition of how much work still needs to be done, particularly in relation to our offshore student cohort.

The specifically language-oriented learning objectives of the unit relating to writing are threefold:

- to write accurate, clear and powerful copy that both focuses on the needs and potential responses of its readers and fulfils specific communicative objectives
- to plan, prepare and write effective public relations documents—emails, newsletters, brochures, flyers, feature and news articles, for example—targeted at a range of publics
- to critically evaluate the rhetorical effects and ethical implications of public relations (written) materials.

Clearly the writing objectives here aim to address both the standardised and the culture- and context-specific elements of writing practices. The objectives of writing with ‘accuracy’, and of producing ‘effective public relations documents’ in conventional formats acknowledge the demand for standardising writing practices. At the same time, and by contrast, the objectives of producing copy that meets ‘the needs and potential responses of its readers and fulfils specific communicative objectives’ and of developing the ability to ‘evaluate the rhetorical effects and ethical implications of public relations (written) materials’ acknowledge the significance of writing that is sensitive to the local and that can readily respond to diversity.

Setting and then assessing writing tasks, when working with our home and international students onshore, in order to address these different kinds of objectives has not seemed to pose too many problems—certainly not in terms of our use of Australian and international materials and a broad understanding of culture and the role of language in both intra- and inter-cultural contexts. For example, in the first essay on contextualised understandings of public relations, all students have the option to focus on non-Western conceptions of public relations. Additionally, the in-class test requiring students to produce written documents in response to a given scenario has a combined Malaysian/Australian topic focus. In assessment we pay close attention to standard formal English skills components as those are integrated with culturally and contextually appropriate writing practices. However, we would have to admit that, as we are still relatively ignorant about the forms and practices of local forms of English used by international students, we are at present more likely to ‘correct’ such usage rather than consider whether instances of its use are effective and appropriate.

With the offering of this unit offshore for the first time, however, we have been encouraged to reflect more deeply on our assumptions about what constitutes such so-called culturally and contextually appropriate writing practices, in addition to what constitutes the internationalising of the curriculum. At first, aware of the demand for equivalence in learning outcomes, we assumed that in our role as moderators of offshore assessments, we could straightforwardly apply the same criteria to moderating the grading of the assignments marked by the offshore teacher as we do to those we grade ourselves here at Murdoch University.

In fact, the combined experiences of teaching offshore students in Malaysia, moderating written assessments, and, most recently, researching into issues relating to the internationalising of the curriculum, we realise that we face some large tasks. We also realise that we are constrained by institutional processes and practices from making the kinds of adjustments we see as crucial to developing a genuinely international approach to public relations education.

Conclusion: International Contexts and Global Education

First, we believe that more high-level research is required into the ways that international students of public relations perceive and interpret the conceptual, theoretical and linguistic material that they are expected to work with during the course of their degrees. Importantly, research is required into how they then apply that material to their own culturally specific contexts of knowledge and understandings about public relations, using rhetorical conventions and discursive frames and patterns other than those that we (coming from a Western background and context) most readily recognise as 'appropriate' (see Liddicoat 1997).

Second, we feel that as educators we have much to learn in the process of becoming what Badley (2000) calls 'globally competent university teachers. Badley is interested in the transformative and democratic benefits that result from taking an ethnographic stance in both teaching and learning—in other words, a position from which teachers and students become self-conscious about their own perspectives and deliberately engage with and try to understand those of others. This position, of course, has much in common with the idea and practice of criticality we identified earlier. In terms of language, which is so powerful in determining what it is we see and how it is we come to know anything at all, this demand sets up a huge—but we think hugely important—challenge.

Finally, we are aware that the first two endeavours must struggle to be realised in a context where the benefits of international education are, in practice, understood far more clearly through a market economy discourse, interested in the financial viability of the university sector, than through an education discourse interested in the role of language and culture in enriching human knowledge and value (see Leask 2003).

Pincas notes that globalisation is 'producing two contradictory phenomena for the individual: standardisation and diversification' (2001:42). As we have aimed to show in this paper, we are thus challenged as educators to negotiate this tension through a stance of criticality, and a keen sensitivity to language and culture (ours and others) as crucial determinants of the conceptual, practical and ethical approaches to public relations we encourage in our students. Rather than accepting the drive towards marketing our public relations degrees internationally as a primarily financial imperative, we feel that the increasing internationalisation of our student cohort does offer a unique opportunity to develop public relations practitioners who, equipped to interrogate normative approaches, understand the role of culture in communication, can analyse and evaluate information across a range of social and political contexts, and can develop suitable strategies and activities in response.

Devotees of an exclusively profit-driven approach to the profession around the world have discovered to their cost that public relations cannot afford to be solely motivated by the financial benefits of its practices. It is much the same with international public relations education. We must match any financial gains with a serious investment in a field for which the benefits of research, teaching and practice in critical awareness, intercultural understanding and practical sensitivity to the richness and range of language as communication are limitless.

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